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SUBJECT: EMBASSY PRESSURE TO IMPROVE CONDITIONS IN PUBLIC  
ORPHANAGES, IMPROVE OVERSIGHT

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: NGOs recently approached Embassy Kabul with the news that the Afghan Ministry of Labor, Social Affairs, Martyrs and the Disabled (MOLSA) has issued order to close some residential orphanages for the winter. This practice, apparently routine for the winter months, is a way both to avoid costly heating bills and manage budget shortfalls. The Ministry denies that residential orphanages close for the winter; however, PRT evidence suggests otherwise. In addition to humanitarian concerns, children with nowhere to go could be vulnerable to insurgent madrassa recruitment. Further, the Department of Orphanages is beset by wide-ranging systemic problems. Embassy attention has already proven partially effective in drawing MOLSA attention to these problems. However, continued Embassy pressure will be necessary to ensure MOLSA enforces its policies, monitors its facilities, and keeps every orphanage open year-round. Embassy Kabul will also work with other donors and NGOs to address these issues. This cable is the second in a series on children at risk in Afghanistan. END SUMMARY.

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Background  
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¶2. (U) During a series of ten meetings conducted November 2-23, Poloff met with child protection specialists, NGOs, and Ministry officials to assess the conditions of children in orphanages that reportedly were facing possible winter closures and to gain further clarification on ministry policies and practices. As in many developing countries, orphanages function partly as crisis centers for children at risk and as boarding schools for the chronically poor; orphanages provide food, shelter, and education for children age 4-18 when their extended families cannot or will not provide for them. In Afghanistan, an orphan is a child lacking a father; fewer than 40 percent of the children in the orphanages lack both parents. Ministry of Labor, Social Affairs, Martyrs and the Disabled (MOLSA) runs two types of facilities supporting more than 12,200 children at risk: 32 orphanages, which serve as 24-hour residential centers for children age 4-18; and 22 Day Care Centers (DCCs), which are non-residential crisis centers for vulnerable children to receive food, education, medical attention, and structured activity, including vocational training. The only USG-funded program for this population is the Access English Language program administered through the Embassy's Public Affairs section. (NOTE: There are 10 privately-run orphanages in country; Ministry officials acknowledge that these facilities are better-run than the state facilities. This cable only addresses conditions in the state-run facilities.)

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Tracking Down Rumored Closures  
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¶3. (SBU) On November 12, Poloff met with Wasil Noor, Deputy Minister of Social Affairs, MOLSA, to discuss an NGO report that the Ministry was shuttering orphanages as part of its annual money-saving campaign. Noor flatly denied the report,

insisting that even during the three-week H1N1 school closure in November orphanages did not evict children. He insisted that during emergency closures and annual holidays, which are timed to Ministry of Education school closures, the children themselves make the decision whether to stay or leave. Poloff explained that information from the PRTs suggests that this progressive policy is not being carried out in provincial facilities. Indeed, PRTs reported that in previous years, staff shuttered the orphanages in several locations (Farah, Gardez, Ghor, Laghman, and Paktya) and some orphanages were entirely closed during the H1N1 closure (Farah, Khost, Nangarhar, and Paktika). (NOTE: PRT officials and USAID field officers will make unannounced visits to the orphanages throughout the winter to check whether the policy is being enforced. END NOTE.)

¶4. (SBU) In response to Poloff's inquiry regarding MOLSA's monitoring policies, Noor said they schedule one or two trips per year to each facility. However, he complained that security concerns made monitoring difficult. Poloff asked if unannounced visits were part of the monitoring protocol; Noor responded that they were not. (Note: During a November 23 meeting with Mr. Ahmad Komail, MOLSA's Director of External Relations, Komail insisted that unannounced visits were the norm. End Note.)

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Rampant Corruption and Abuse  
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¶5. (SBU) MOLSA officials acknowledge that the state-run orphanage system is riddled with corruption. Funds

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reportedly do not reach their proper destination. While Noor told us that MOLSA has sufficient budget for its needs, lower-level officials complain about the low-levels of funding. NGOs with whom Poloff met allege that some lower-level staff are involved in a range of corrupt and abusive practices, including: (a) black market activities in donated goods; (b) violent abuse against children, including sexual abuse; (c) facilitating bride price transfers for girls; (d) stealing food; (e) assisting local police in prostituting the children; (f) allowing the children to supervise one another, which in some cases leads to children inflicting physical and psychological violence on one another; (g) gross levels of absenteeism; and (h) permitting extremely unhealthy living conditions to flourish. One MOLSA official claimed that girls are frequently raped by the staff.

¶6. (SBU) Conditions in many orphanages are substandard: buildings are inadequately heated, have poor or nonexistent plumbing facilities, lack sufficient materials for schooling, and the children often complain they don't have enough to eat. Malnutrition and physical and mental illness are common, and frequently go untreated. By law, no government building may use heaters before December 15, a money-saving strategy with potential health consequences for young children. Poloff asked if an exception could be made for the orphanages, and was told that a presidential decree is required for such an exception.

¶7. (SBU) Noor asserted that he is aware of the lack of capacity<sup>8</sup> of his provincial staff and their penchant for dipping into the till. After Poloff shared PRT photos of the Chagcharan orphanage in Ghor as an example of a facility that requires closer supervision, Noor responded that if MOLSA had access to a US Embassy air flight, they would arrange for monitors to travel to Ghor immediately.

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Interagency Solutions  
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¶8. (U) Following Noor's request, we worked with the Ghor PRT

to arrange a US Embassy air flight for two MOLSA monitors to visit the Chagcharan orphanage Nov. 21-24. The trip was successful from a monitoring perspective; the MOLSA team found the living conditions at the orphanage "unbearable," and submitted a detailed report with ten recommendations addressing both immediate and long-term concerns at the Chagcharan facility. One MOLSA recommendation was for on-site MOLSA representation and/or frequent monitoring visits.

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Comment and Action Plan  
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¶9. (U) As a result of these reports, the Embassy has formed an internal interagency group to share information and brainstorm ways to address the orphanage crisis in non-monetary ways. In addition to humanitarian interest, we are concerned that when orphanages close for the school holidays, children without families will gravitate toward madrassas influenced or run by extremist interests as shelter, although we do not have hard evidence that this is happening. The same applies to 18 year-olds, who must leave the facilities at the end of their grade 12 studies. It is clear that on the basis of our inquiries, MOLSA is responding proactively, at least in Kabul. We have requested copies of their monitoring policies, and will continue to consider non-financial incentives to encourage MOLSA to carry out their mandate.

¶10. (SBU) Ensuring that the Government of Afghanistan shelters and feeds this small but susceptible population twelve months of the year is a small step that can reduce the likelihood that these juveniles becomes vulnerable to insurgent exploitation and madrassa recruitment. Embassy Kabul plans to pursue the following actions:

- Continue to pressure GIROA to enforce their policies, especially keeping orphanages open year-round;
- On a space-available basis, allow MOLSA monitors to travel to provincial orphanages on US Embassy air flights;
- Conduct unannounced visits by USAID field and PRT officials at the provincial orphanages, especially during school holidays, to ensure year-round operation;
- Pressure GIROA to address winter heating problems;
- Develop public diplomacy strategies to raise awareness of children's rights and to raise the profile of orphanages as valuable examples of Islamic alms-giving institutions, deserving of community support;

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- Place a child protection advisor within MOLSA;
- Urge effective ministerial appointments; and
- Work to mobilize other embassies and international NGOs to join us in these efforts.

¶11. (SBU) As GIROA moves forward with its renewed commitment to appointing competent and capable people in key ministries, MOLSA should be included as a ministry requiring immediate attention. We will urge that MOLSA should replace current staff with leaders with demonstrated commitment to social welfare reform.

¶12. (SBU) Further, Embassy Kabul will continue to give attention, including at the highest levels, to impress upon GIROA officials that existing resources must be used correctly. More funding is not a solution, and in the short-term could simply exacerbate the problem of potential corruption, without systemic reforms of monitoring practices.

It would be a mistake to direct more funding to the orphanages without first strengthening MOLSA's capacity to manage its budgets and to respond internally to misdirected funds. Such reforms can yield significant results. End  
Comment/Action Plan.  
Eikenberry